An Information Programme for Rural Potable Water Supplies and Sanitation. Contribution to Discussion Paper to be presented to Government Authorities

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Introduction

The Technical and Institutional Panels of the Ad-Hoc Working Group on Rural Potable Water Supplies and Sanitation both identified lack of information as a major impediment to the provision of safe drinking water to a large proportion of the world's rural peoples. This paper outlines the sort of information programme that might remedy this lack, and suggests ways in which the problem could be studied further, in co-operation with organizations already involved. It should be treated as a proposed course of action, illustrated by examples, rather than even a sketchy systems design.

Background

Policy-makers, engineers, local elders, tax-payers, technicians, the drinkers of water, the gamut of people involved in the installation and maintenance of safe water supplies and sanitation services have all suffered through lack of information. They have not had the right information in the place where it was needed in an acceptable form at the time when it was most needed. This helps to explain why governments have not paid sufficient attention to rural needs, why the systems that have been installed have fallen into disuse, and why users have reverted to old habits.

Lack of appropriate information is an endemic problem in many developing countries. Most technical journals are published in the developed world and are aimed at a highly trained and sophisticated clientele. Abstracting and indexing services point to documents that are often impossible to obtain. Literature is usually expensive, and even if a developing-country user knows what he wants, foreign exchange shortages may override all other considerations. In the past decade, several United Nations agencies have approached this problem by setting up co-operative information systems based upon a decentralized collection of the world's output of literature in specific fields and the central production of a world file. The outputs, a regular printed bibliography and a magnetic tape, both of which can be searched for references to specific subjects, are backed by a library network and a photocopy service. The two best established

intergovernmental systems - INIS the International Nuclear Information System, and AGRIS the International Information System for the Agricultural Sciences and Technology - are, however, used by and large by the qualified scientist or technician working in an academic atmosphere oriented towards research and development.

It would be all too easy to emulate these systems for water supplies and sanitation, but in order to reach the minds of the people in immediate need of information, a document-oriented system will not be enough. Before designing an information system, it will be necessary to investigate how these people can be reached effectively.

What is being done already

The WHO International Reference Centre for Community Water Supply is already attempting to provide an information service in this area. Certainly it is the organization that is the most aware of the problems involved. It has a small collection of documents and is setting up a mechanical retrieval system to handle them. It does not yet have a full-time librarian or documentalist, and it has not yet completed the necessary theoretical work behind the system. It is, however, answering questions from all over the world by providing literature references, documents, or specially written material. Postal deficiencies and the small staff often lead to a delay of several weeks between the question and the answer, and the problem is compounded as the questioner is often most imprecise in stating his requirements. To conduct the dialogue that should take place to ascertain the questioner's real needs would take several months without face-to-face contact. With its network of collaborating institutions, the IRC is also able to collect some of the important literature produced at the local level but not published in the conventional sense. Regular collection of information is found to require persistent correspondence, however, otherwise the supply quickly peters out.

Certain regional attempts have also been made to tackle the information problem. Particularly in Latin America, where the political and linguistic climates are suitable, CEPIS the Pan-American Centre for Sanitary Engineering and the Environmental Sciences has proposed a regional meeting to consider Latin America's needs, and regional ways of meeting them.

Next Steps

At the Ad Hoc Working Group's meeting in Geneva, 12th to 14th February 1975, the panels' basic recommendations were accepted. A network approach to the provision of improved water supply and sanitation services was proposed, which would certainly be appropriate to the problems of information. A paper was presented which outlined some of the services that could be considered and included more details than given here (J.E. Woolston and M.Brandreth, Some Thoughts on a World Information Service related to Rural Water Supplies and Sanitation in Developing Countries). The network would consist of international, regional and national nodes, and would be built, if at all possible, upon existing institutions. The relative importance of the various nodes, that is the amount of centralization or decentralization needed, would only emerge from further study. The International Reference Centre, however, would play an important role in the investigatory study, and subject to approval by the Dutch authorities could become the international node in a network handling much more information than is handled at present. This enlarged role would require the IRC to be restructured in terms of direction, management and financing to enable it to be fully responsive to the needs of the network.

We suggest that a small task force be set up to work with the IRC in designing an information system to meet established needs. It might consist of a sanitation or water supply engineer, a librarian or documentalist, and a sociologist, all preferably with experience of developing countries, together with an IRC staff member who is already involved in an information service. The task force's study

would include the following topics:

a) What people are we trying to reach directly with the systems? Engineers, national policy-makers, local community leaders, tax-payers, schools, and parents. Are some of these people themselves involved in passing on information?

b) What types of information do these people need, and in what form? Highly technical literature, simple pamphlets, radio programmes, newspaper articles, oral explanations given by travelling teachers, villager training, demonstration projects visited by chosen opinion-formers? Regional meetings would help here and in e) and f).

c) What subjects should be covered by the system? Community water supply or rural water supply, sanitation, the treatment of diseases, chemical pollution? A detailed subject scope will eventually be needed if many dispersed people are to contribute and take information.

d) What information is already available and in what form? Have existing projects produced recorded information? What information has not been recorded? This will decide the initial size of the network.

e) Where is this information located at present? In international, regional or national bodies? What organizations can be identified at all levels as potential nodes in the network.

f) How much of the information that is or should be recorded is specific to certain locations? How much is relevant at the global level and therefore should be in a world file? This will indicate the amount of centralization needed in the network for collection and dissemination of information and also how much translation work may be required.

When questions such as these have been answered, the various services

or products to be provided by the network can then be considered. They include; in no special order of priority:

1. A literature-retrieval service, identifying documents, journal articles, books, catalogues, etc., indexing them, and making them available as required. This is probably an essential component.

2. A literature-production service, commissioning the writing of state-of-the-art reviews, comparative studies and case studies. Given that much valuable experience is not at present recorded, this too is probably an essential component.

3. A teaching-aids service, concentrating on the production of textbooks, films and other audio-visual products. At some level, this is probably also an essential component.

4. An equipment-information service, identifying appropriate equipment available and giving performance specifications. Where possible it would be an advantage to link in the results of the work of testing laboratories and field-use experience.

5. A statistical service, identifying the populations that have access to various types of water and sanitation service and those that do not. This might have a cartographic component.

6. A projects and investments register. Who is doing what and where? Where is the money coming from? Where will it be spent? On what? To the extent that this information is available, it speeds up the process of "getting to know", since one can approach the responsible people while their work is still in progress and before any documents are issued. But it is a very difficult service to keep up-to-date and reliable, and it depends on having good communications with the funding agencies, especially national governments.

7. An experts register, identifying individuals, their experience by subject and by geographic region, languages, etc.

8. A translation service. In so far as this involves translations from minor languages to major world languages (or vice-versa), the activity could be handled in the regional or national centres. In so far as it involved translations between major world languages, the international centre may have a role to play.

Without anticipating the outcome, such would be the basis for a feasibility study for an information system. The emphasis would be on the collection and dissemination of recorded information that would be important over a region or the entire developing world. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that a system of this type cannot work in a vacuum if it is to produce worthwhile results quickly. To reach the people who really need the information, it must have strong connections with national and local organizations, perhaps transmitting information by word of mouth. Provided that those involved can be taught where to go for information and also what information of theirs should be passed to others, significant progress could be made rapidly.